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Career Enhancement Strategies for Young Researchers and Academics

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Abstract

Most young researchers and academics consist of postgraduate students. Similar to other types of professions, young researchers and academics need to understand the right strategies in order to enhance their career.

Strategies for career enhancement can be categorized into personal-based and community-based items. Personal-based items are skills, experience, and expertise that can help a researcher or academic to climb the corporate ladder. Community-based items relate to the organisations in the field.

The most important strategy is career planning. Young researchers and academics should consult as many parties as possible when planning their career. Frequent review and modification to the career plan is vital for a successful career.

To turn the career plan into action, one should start with self-development. Skills such as time management, communication, information technology, interpersonal, and leadership must be acquired. In addition, work experience that relates to the research field should be gained. This provides a good track record for future reference. To stay up to date and remain competitive, young researchers and academics must obtain expertise knowledge in the profession. One way to achieve this is to become a member of professional organisations. Another point worth mentioning is the importance of acquiring multi-disciplinary knowledge.

In the era of globalisation, young researchers and academics need more than paper qualifications to stay competitive. Multilingual skills could be an advantage in this context. Cultural awareness and respect of local customs would help to strengthen community bonds. Networking with fellow researchers and academics at the regional and international levels would prove beneficial. Mentoring and coaching opportunities should be utilised.

Good sense of global trend and development directions is essential. For example, the recent growth in information and communication technology (ICT), nanotechnology, biotechnology, and other disciplines increased both government and private sector funding in the related areas. Besides that, changes in educational systems, government policies, and national priority would affect one's career development. For instance, some governments begin to emphasize research commercialisation, research specialisation, sustainable development, and national security following major events that have happened in recent years.

With the personal-based and community-based strategies described above, young researchers and academics could enhance their career to a higher ground.

1. Introduction

Among young researchers and academics, many of them are postgraduate students. Postgraduate students in this context refer to those candidates pursuing their master degree, doctorate or professional doctorate degrees. They choose further study for various reasons, ranging from personal interest in the academic field to better occupational competency. In Australia, postgraduate students are mostly above 30 years of age (Brian Edwards, 2002). This means they are in the early stage or middle stage of their career path, and need to understand the right strategies for career enhancement. It is important to do things right, and to do it right the first time will potentially save them future effort. In addition, it is good to work smart besides working hard. A good start can be equated to the achievement of half of the goals.

The career enhancement strategies in this paper can be grouped into personal-based and community-based items. The former refers to the skills, experiences, and expertise that belong to an individual, and the latter relates to the organisations in the field as well as other external entities. Both of these items are important to enable young researchers or academics advance in their career path.

2. Strategies

2.1. Career Plan

Consider the famous clause “If we fail to plan, then we are planning to fail”. Therefore, the primary task of young researchers or academics is to plan their career as early as possible. The career plan could cover short term and long term objectives. To determine a sensible and workable plan, a SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats) analysis can be applied (QuickMBA.com, 2004). Besides this, individual interests and market trends must be observed. Enthusiasm is the force that can drive young researchers and academics towards a successful career. A recent IT article (Rodney Gedda, 2005) suggested that IT professionals with law or accounting qualifications would have better employability compared to those who have the technical knowledge. An earlier article in the academia also mentioned the importance of multi-disciplinary competitiveness (Elisabeth Pain, 2003).

Young researchers and academics should consult as many sources as possible when planning their career. To begin, they can talk to the senior students in the same laboratory, department, faculty, or university. They can also explore the knowledge pool beyond those groups. They can consider their supervisory team and senior staff in their organisations. They can also approach career advisors in the university (QUT, 2005b). Moving further from the small circle, they can consult those who graduated recently and started to work. These targets have the extra knowledge and real life working experience in their respective industries. The young researchers and academics can also contact the professionals whom they could meet in conferences, forums, seminars, meetings, etc. In addition, links made by family and relatives might be useful in seeking extra information. In order to take advantage of the information and communication technologies (ICT), they can go on to the internet and communicate with people from around the globe. There are many tools and methods available, for instance, email, real time chat, voice over IP (VoIP), and teleconferencing. The sites to look into are ordinary websites, web-logs (a.k.a. blogs),

bulletin board systems (BBS), and databases. Some professional organisations provide good resources for career planning on their web. For example, the IEEE Career and Employment Resources (IEEE, 2005) and the ACM Career Resource Centre (ACM, 2005).

The plan established should be reviewed annually to reflect changes in their achievement, interests, and the new environment. A goal that takes longer than its expected time to be completed requires re-design of the schedule in the plan. A diversion in personal interests might happen when new branches of specialisation appear. The job market a year from now may provide new and quite different opportunities.

2.2. Self Development

With the career plan in place, young researchers and academics can take actions to realise their dreams. The most important move is to develop themselves in terms of skills and expertise.

Skills such as time management, communication, information technology, interpersonal, and leadership must be acquired. There are many commonly known phrases that remind us of the need to manage time. Two good examples are “If we cannot manage time, time will manage us” and “Procrastination is the thief of time”. The obvious equality on earth is that everyone is allocated 24 hours a day, no more and no less. To succeed in ones career, good skills of time management proved to be an asset. As professionals, young researchers and academics are expected to take many roles, ranging from managerial to executive. Therefore, they need to be able to squeeze many tasks into a limited time frame. To do this, they can apply methods such as concurrent job execution and job delegation. It must be noted that besides the formal jobs at work, young researchers and academics must also play their roles as a family member and community member. They may have parents and children to take care of, and to interact with their neighbours. As a result, they need to prioritize their commitments wisely to achieve a balance between working life and social life.

Good command of communication skills would increase the effectiveness and efficiency of getting a job done. A clearly and correctly delivered instruction would reduce the chance of erroneous results. This not only improves productivity but also reflects the professional image of the young researchers and academics. “Practise makes perfect” is as true as the theories described in books. The communication skills to be learnt and improved are written, spoken, listening, and speaking. It covers the daily conversational and reporting skills.

In the era of advanced technologies, young researchers and academics need to have information technology (IT) know-how. They are expected to have some basic IT skills such as using the computer to produce reports and communicate via emails. It has become very common to have Microsoft Office or Open Office applications on a computer, and professional staff should be familiar with this software. Related items like printers and scanners are also commonly found in offices and laboratories. Email also has become a major channel of communication besides the telephone. In recent years, instant messaging has emerged as a new communication tool. Being part of the research community, young researchers and academics must be able to locate various literatures in electronic form. These include online databases, e-print repositories, and

other contents on the web. Although there are some negative reports on mobile phones, personal digital assistants (PDAs), digital cameras, and other electronic gadgets, these “toys” could be of great help if used appropriately. For example, set the mobile phone into vibration or silent mode during a meeting if an urgent call is expected.

Interpersonal skills enable young researchers and academics to deal with people effectively and get the job done. Nobody is an island; daily events that require interpersonal skills include discussion, negotiation, reporting, networking, and many more. The people involved could consist of various groups and backgrounds. They could be colleagues, superiors, students, or corporate clients. Also, they could come from various countries and have different language, accent, culture, religious faith, and physical appearance. Dealing with people could be as simple as a friendly gesture of smiling, or as complex as “putting yourself in their shoes” and read into their minds. The best place to learn interpersonal skills is real life scenarios. Through life experiences, young researchers and academics should be able to improve their interpersonal skills.

At the professional level, young researchers and academics are leaders in one way or another. They may involve in student project supervision, project team leading, or simply chairing a meeting. These activities require them to demonstrate good leadership. Leadership skills would empower them to motivate their team members, resolve conflict among team members, and earn respect as a chief. All of the skills described are inter-related. For instance, without good communication skills, young researchers and academics cannot practise and improve their interpersonal skills. Consequently, they would find it difficult to sharpen their leadership skills. In addition, poor time management would not put them in the chair as a respectable leader.

Recognising the benefits of industrial training, many tertiary educational institutions had included internship in their program of studies (QUT, 2005c). At the postgraduate level, many universities encourage industrial collaboration of research projects and promote student exchange programs. Be it a local or an international arrangement, young researchers and academics should fully utilise these opportunities to broaden their research experiences, gain extra knowledge, and build up their professional contacts. In addition, these are useful references for their resume. However, they must be cautious not to be distracted from their major research directions. This is especially important for postgraduates who are approaching their final stage of study.

As an expert in their field, young researchers and academics must equip themselves with the latest knowledge uncovered by the research community. To develop in their respective areas, they can become members of professional organisations. For example, the Association for Computing Machinery (ACM) is a good source of updates for the IT field. There are also compulsory memberships for certain professions. Examples are the medical practitioners, lawyers, accountants, and engineers. Some organisations offer various membership grades such as student, professional, and life membership. Direct benefits of joining these organisations normally include printed magazine, electronic newsletter subscription, book discounts, and workshop/conference/seminar invitations. Indirectly, networking with other

professionals would enable information exchange on the latest developments in their institutions.

It is worth mentioning the importance of acquiring multi-disciplinary knowledge. The Australian universities allow students to major in two disciplines and receive degrees in both faculties. For example, a student can graduate with a bachelor in IT and a bachelor in business (QUT, 2005a). This increases the employability of the graduates because they are better equipped to contribute to the company compared to those with a single IT degree. Such multi-disciplinary talents are also in high demand for postgraduates (Elisabeth Pain, 2003). The example given in “Career Plan” section of this paper is a good reference. With knowledge of a different field, young researchers and professionals are in a better position to appreciate different viewpoints and become good team members. They are also able to provide integrated solutions instead of tackling problems from a single angle.

2.3. Global Context

To stay competitive in the era of globalisation, young researchers and academics need more than paper qualifications. This group would have an advantage if they had foreign language skills. They will have access to extra channels of acquiring new knowledge. For example, many technical research findings have been published in French and not English. Good evidence exists in the current situations in Europe and Southeast Asian countries where most people have multilingual skills. It is predicted that Chinese language (Mandarin to be exact) will become a world dominant language in the future. This will affect not only the people doing business but also researchers and academics. There has been an increase in Chinese language and culture courses offered in the Western countries recently (People's Daily Online, 2004) (Ellen Davis, 2005). This is partly due to the opening of China's market after they join the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Being part of a community, young researchers and academics need to interact with the local people on a daily basis. This could be a small community like a laboratory or a big group of people in an institution. Good relationships with the community would help them in their career. One of the ways to enhance such relationships is to practice effective interpersonal skills. To do so, an awareness of cultural differences is necessary. Therefore, young researchers and academics need to be aware of local culture and practices in order to build a strong bond with the community. For instance, most oriental people prefer to shake hands whereas most western people practice hugging as a friendly gesture. There are also corporate cultures and unwritten rules that one needs to seek and understand. It is always good to ask about such things when in doubt. Being a newbie in the research community, one has to play by the rules which could be industry-specific.

Great benefits could be enjoyed if young researchers and academics build and maintain connections with their colleagues. For example, most of the research job vacancies are never advertised and these hidden job markets are filled through people linkages (Graduate Careers Australia, 2005). Networking at the local level may prove helpful if they require instant and physical assistance. On the other hand, networking at a global level extends their reach to more variety of research tools and techniques. With these connections, a friend may be able to introduce young researchers and academics to the right person when they need help. Some of the networking

opportunities include conferences, workshops, temporary attachments through sabbaticals, and staff exchange programs. Business card is an essential networking tool, and must be kept handy at those times. After the first contact, the relationship must be maintained with regular follow up either through email, telephone, or other communication channels. This is to prevent the fact of “out of sight, out of mind” from happening.

It is good to acquire mentoring or coaching when young researchers and academics climb up the corporate ladder. Mentors can provide young researchers and academics with guidance, advice, motivations, and counselling throughout their career path. Young researchers and academics can search for a mentor within the organisation or locate one externally. However, a good mentor or coach is not easily found. Also, a good mentor must be carefully chosen because it will be a close relationship. Among the factors to be considered are experience, expertise, track records, gender, and age.

2.4. Flexibility

Young researchers and academics should be flexible to adapt to the latest developments in their field. Although research interest and enthusiasm is essential, adaptability to the surrounding environments is of equal importance. Young researchers and academics should be sensitive to the global trend. For example, the recent growth in information and communication technology (ICT), nanotechnology, and biotechnology had increased both government and private sector funding in the related areas. If they do not stay alert to these changes, then research funding opportunities may be missed. Each institution and government has its own priority areas for research and development. These areas usually have larger amount of allocations and higher probability of funding approval compared to other areas. Young researchers and academics should grab these opportunities to enhance their career if it falls within their research interest scope and expertise. The funds can be used in hiring research assistants, training team members, purchasing new equipment, organising seminars, publishing research results in conferences, and running routine operations. In addition, some institutions may offer competitive contract packages to attract international experts to join their research project (DFG, 2005). Young researchers and academics should consider such cross-border opportunities if the environment is welcoming. All of these could help to improve their track records and further uplift their profiles. Having mentioned that, young researchers and academics should also consider the reverse conditions that could occur. For instance, some governments strongly object the research into human cloning because it links to serious ethical consequences.

Finally, young researchers and academics should be aware of changes in educational systems, government policies, and national priority because it could affect their own career development. The introduction of professional doctorate degree at some universities gives new perspectives to higher degree education. The study program normally emphasizes both theories and practical issues. Thus it has the advantage of real life application and close linkage with the industry. However, a more heavily loaded program may demand more study time and effort. Young researchers and academics should weigh the pros and cons carefully before signing up for the program. Additionally, changes in government policies may affect the career advancement of young researchers and academics. One good example is the reduced funding of university research projects and promotion of research commercialisation by the

Australian government recently (CAPA Media Release, 2004). Also, the proposed modification to the Industrial Relationship (IR) rules would affect employment benefits (Parliament of Australia, 2005) (Paul Smyth, 2005) (National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU), 2005) (Terri MacDonald, 2004). These changes definitely require young researchers and academics to alter their career plan accordingly. In addition, some governments demanded that their universities specialise in areas where they have high potential to excel, and demote the other research areas. Such arrangements drastically disturb the careers of the young researchers and academics if their faculties are affected. Major events that had happened may have positive or negative effects on young researchers and academics. For example, the rising awareness of environment issues has put priority on research projects that investigate sustainable developments and green technologies. Also, some governments have begun to focus on national security and defence after major terrorism incidents happened.

3. Summary

Personal-based and community-based strategies are described in this paper to assist young researchers and academics in enhancing their career. Being the future leaders, this group of young professionals need to enrich their skills, experiences, and expertise to face the challenges in their career path. Staying alert of happenings at the local and international levels is crucial in preparing themselves to achieve higher grounds in their works.

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